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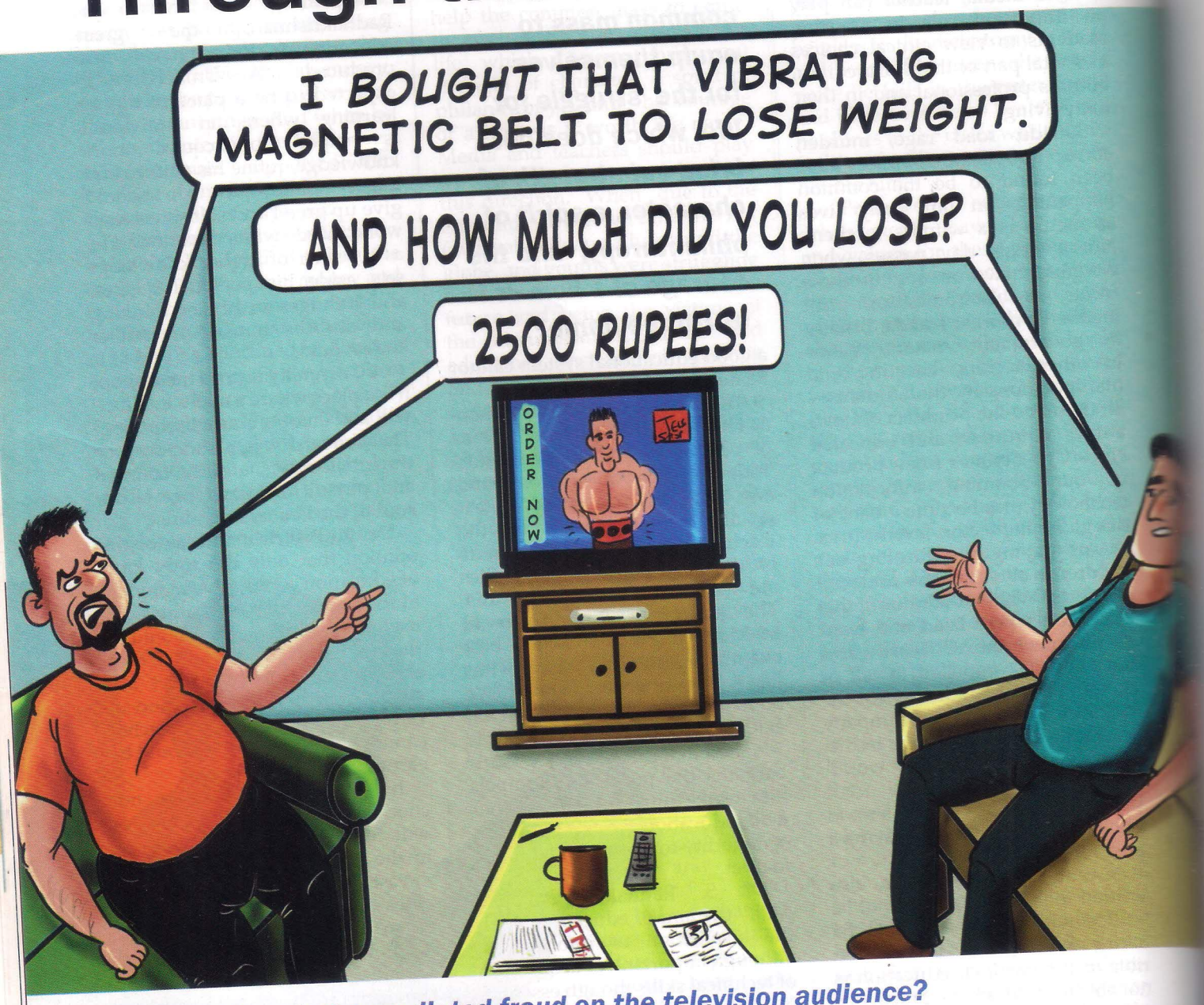
The need of the hour is development journalism

Through the idiot box



Is 'Tele-shopping' a mediated fraud on the television audience?

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By the term 'tele-shopping' or 'tele-brands', one conjures up the television visuals of semi-clad western men or women doing gyrations on gym machines showing how those exercises helped them condition their body both in size and weight. Though there are Indianised 'tele-shopping' or 'tele-brands' today, western visuals still keep regularly occupying a lot of time and the space on small screen.

The importance of its analysis in media studies, however, arises from the fact that these 'paid forms of advertising' involve both the telecommunications and the film genre (narrative form) leading to 'convergence' of media. There are a number of important factors which need to be examined

and analysed with respect to this important area of 'convergence' as a medium for 'advertising' called 'infomercial' which is distinct from and quite different from the usual 'commercial' that one watches for the branded products on the small screen.

'Infomercials' are 'long format' television commercials, typically five minutes or even longer. 'Infomercials' are also known as 'paid programming' or 'tele-shopping' in Europe (Infomercial: Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infomercial). The term 'infomercial' is actually intended to provide the 'factual' information about the product to persuade one to a 'buying attitude' but it came to stay in practice today as an 'information' which is more an 'exaggeration' or 'hiding' a lot of related facts concerning the product.

Though this is an important area of research, not much of study is unfortunately done both in India and abroad. The present study, perhaps, is first of its kind in India, and as I began to study these advertisements regularly on the small screen, a number of questions daunt my mind. Firstly as mentioned earlier, most of these advertisements are long, gruelling, and boring. Some advertisements even tend to be very 'unscientific' giving enough impetus for propagation of irrational ideas too. What ever begins in the West and the Europe, and transforms there into a major organised marketing becomes a fraud in India. Why? Answer to this question is possible only when one begins to make an in depth study of these. Questions have also arisen in my mind as to the role of the TV and its social responsibility as a medium which carries these messages in the form of 'Bullets' (Bullet Theory of Harold Laswell, 1930). Though many believe that 'Bullet theory' is outdated, in the case of advertising theory of communication, many authors, including Phillip Koetler, hold that Bullet theory is still relevant.

Are not these 'tele-shopping' or 'tele-brand' advertisements perpetrating a continuous fraud on the audience through their long and repeated flighting or pulsing on the TV screen? Are not the TV channels accountable to the society in airing such spurious contents and messages as found in these advertisements of 'tele-shopping' or 'tele-branding'? Are not the TV channels amassing a lot of money through these advertisements in an un-ethical manner at the cost of the social and economic well being of the gullible people who might believe these 'tele-shopping' advertisements as true and even try to buy them? Is there no way one can check these from going on air so brazenly like this with investigative journalism and blogging working concertedly to expose the frauds on the consumers?

I tried to look at the possible previous literature on this subject through the Google search engine. One paper I came across, however, was that of Carla RM and Silvia S.B (2007) who conducted a study on the consumers of Spain to identify the factors which would motivate the viewers, with or without previous non-store shopping experience, to go for on-line shopping after watching the advertisements of 'tele-shopping' or 'tele-brands' on small screen. Even these two authors noted that the lack of previous research in this area is very much crippling them to formulate any major findings based on any theory. The study was undertaken by them on behalf of the 'tele-shopping' or 'tele-brand' industry. But, till date, I could find no worth while study on the implications of such 'tele-shopping' or 'tele-brands' either in India or abroad from the consumer perspective or media uses and gratification theory.

One might argue or even question - why should anyone bother about these advertisements as they are also a kind of 'paid form of advertising' similar to 'commercials'. But in my study, I found that there is a lot of distinction between the 'paid form of advertising', which we see on the small screen as 'commercials' and the kind of advertising one watches in 'tele-shopping' or in 'tele-brands'. For a brief over view of my study, I summarise some of the noted and striking differences here.

Differentiating characteristics of the advertisements of 'tele-shopping' or 'tele-brands'

Firstly, there are differences in the formats of advertising (content and structure) between the regular TV 'commercials' and the 'tele-shopping' advertisements. Secondly, most of the 'tele-shopping' advertisements in India deal with the 'superstitions', 'sentiments' and 'unscientific' experiments for which they take long sessions and involve so many unknown persons as 'ambassadors' either 'endorsing' or giving a 'testimonial' to the products. Thirdly, none of these 'tele-shopping' or 'tele-brands' advertisements would offer the audience the profile of the companies, their whereabouts, their turnover, profit and losses, contact addresses, etc. What one would get from these advertisements is the telephone numbers through which one need to order the product. Fourthly, even if a local or a toll free all India telephone number is given, it would be difficult from these people to know from where they send the products via post parcel.

Fifth, most of the products of 'tele-shopping' or 'tele-brands' are exorbitantly high priced. Even if it is a peeler set, it would be nonetheless thousand rupees above. Another important point I noted in my study is that these advertisements assure a 'hundred percent result' as a result of using the product and even promise 'refund' if one is 'not satisfied' within the 15 days.

But the ridiculous part of all such promises gets apparent with one finding no address of the original manufacturer anywhere to which one should return the product or correspond with to

claim the refund. Finally, there is no 'warranty' or 'customer care' for the continued public relation with the customers which is actually a marketing strategy in 'integrated marketing communication'. At the same time, the government's usual share of levying sales and service taxes on the sale of the product is missing which by itself is a big tax evasion and a punishable offence. Yet, no cognizance is taken of by the government strangely regarding the sale of these products over phone/mobile.

Above all, none of these advertisements are done in the original national or regional languages. Even if they are of Indian origin like *Deemark Herbal Hair Oil* or *Nuzen Hair Oil,* the original advertisements are in the Hindi and are dubbed into regional languages.

Usually these 'tele-shopping' or 'tele-brands' advertisements are of foreign origin and their voice is dubbed into regional languages such as Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, and Malayalam, etc. However, of late, Indian 'tele-shopping' is also found on the screen. For instance, Divya Rishi and Sapta Rishi Samsthans are offering 'sanctified' and 'purified' holy Hanuman medallions which are dubbed into various languages. However, advertisements related to Divya diamonds and Jewellery or KPJ Jewellery are done in Telugu language. Though we noted that there is some slight difference in the case of applying above analysis to the 'tele-shopping' advertisements of Divya Diamonds and Jewellery and KPJ Jewellery as the addresses of these jewellery shops in Hyderabad are known to the people through these advertisements, the content and structure of the messages and the formats are again nonetheless spreading superstitions and unscientific notions.

In order to explain my study in a little detail, I shall take two Indian 'tele-shopping' advertisements and analyse them with the criteria laid above.

1. Deemark Herbal Hair Oil

Content: Swetha Tiwari introduces herself as an ambassador of the product and endorses that the use of the hair oil brings back hair to the bald headed men/women in a short time.

Messages: Highly unscientific and improbable messages of regenerating hair on the portion of the head where hair is lost. The messages do not lay any age/gender restrictions. The regeneration of hair is almost imminent and equal to all ages and sexes. Exaggerations and metaphors are freely used to emphasize the point of view of the advertisement.

Format Structure: Both narration and dialogue methods are applied. Narration technique is used as case study for a demonstration of a success story using old photographs of the loss of hair followed by the new photographs with hair. Dialogue methods are used as suggestive to the person affected by the hair loss in a 'mockery' or 'derisory' style. At the end, one finds as many as five to six people explaining their experiences with the use of the hair oil.

Contact: All India toll free number or regional number mobile phone number. Not available in any outside shops.

Company profile: Not given.

Price: Above thousand rupees.

Guarantee for resurgence of hair: One to three months

Supply: By parcel and VPP costs etc

Taxes for sale: Not given

Warranty: Nil

Customer care: Nil

I have taken the views expressed by the users on the Deemark Herbal Hair oil from the web-blog www.mouthshut.com. These were the blog postings dating back to April 27, 2009 which expressed that this hair oil, which charged heavily from the consumers (one bottle costs rupees 700/-) due to expensive and long time advertising, has not shown any result of regeneration of hair. http://www.mouthshut.com/review/Deemark_Herbal_Hair_Oil-166446-1.html.

2. Divya Rishi and Sapta Rishi Samsthans Hanuman medallions

Strangely both the samsthans advertise that they offer highly purified (by mantra and rituals) holy medallions of Hanuman in gold plated form at an exorbitantly high price. A bearded monk/ sanyaasi in each advertisement would go before the camera explaining how these medallions would be offering an all time solution to all the problems human beings are usually exposed to. The messages are highly exaggerated suggestive of buying one medallion as panacea for all evils/problems one would face.

They also have incentive offers such as if one orders for one medallion, another is free. They also offer some additional yantra and a CD explaining the use of the medallions etc.

The content begins with 'narration' method followed by 'case studies' coming up in succession explaining their problems, and how they circumvented them by the use of the medallions of Lord Hanuman.

Though the 'refund' promise is valid within 15 days of receiving the medallions, again the usual questions raise regarding not giving enough reasons for such high prices for Lord Hanuman medallions by none other than holy samsthans like Divya Rishi and Sapta Rishi Samsthans. Further the 'refund promise' would run 'contra' to the dictum of 'faith', the monk in each advertisement endeavoured to infuse or install in the audience. In other words, it (the refund promise) is an automatic admission that such a great medallion of Lord Hanuman also may not work for some. Then who is at risk-the buyer or Lord Hanuman or the holiness

and purification process of the vendor? One factor I found in the study is that these samsthans would direct the people to look at their websites (www.divyarishi.org/www.saptarishi.org). But, that does not absolve the kind of propaganda and the success stories these television advertisements try to unveil to the audience to inculcate in them a sense of devotion and faith in the Lord Hanuman medallions which these organisations would propose to sell.

The author here is not casting any aspersions on the holiness of Lord Hanuman per se. Here the author's effort is only to show how the individual faith has been exploited with sheer ease of commercialism by the fake *sanyasis/monks* through their reference to their websites and 'tele-shopping' as a measure of imparting credibility to the advertisement.

Strangely, there are no blogs against these advertisements. Nor could I find any complaints against these medallions in any blog because these medallions primarily deal with the faith in the Lord Hanuman.

Analysis of Tele-brands – Sauna belts, gym instruments, etc.

Further, if one would watch a number of 'tele-brands' dealing with the equipment that would enable one to maintain the body fitness, reduce the size of the belly and the hips, besides the reduction in the weight, most of them are from the Western side.

The persons and the equipment in the action in the advertisement are of foreign origin. The language is dubbed into Hindi and regional languages.

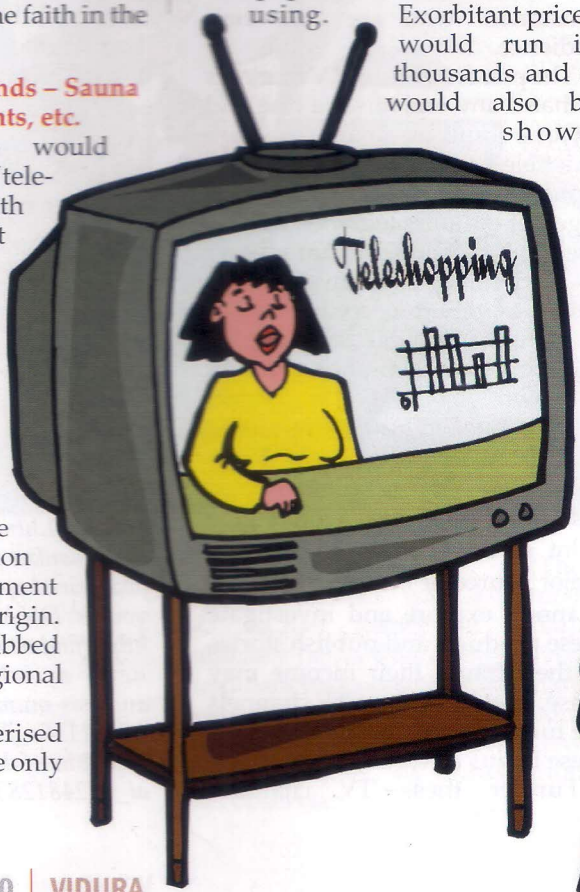
Again, as characterised above, there would be only telephonic numbers for contacts to order the equipment. The demonstrations are limited to the people performing the aerobatics on these equipments. The wider use of the equipment in various parts of the world/India will not be shown. Apparently the narration technique has been followed by the case studies explaining their success stories one by one. But, one would not see really any one undergoing physical changes as claimed after using the equipment in the advertisement itself. Only previously taken photos would be shown while performing the exercise. Further it is not clear how sustainable the exercises on these equipments are.

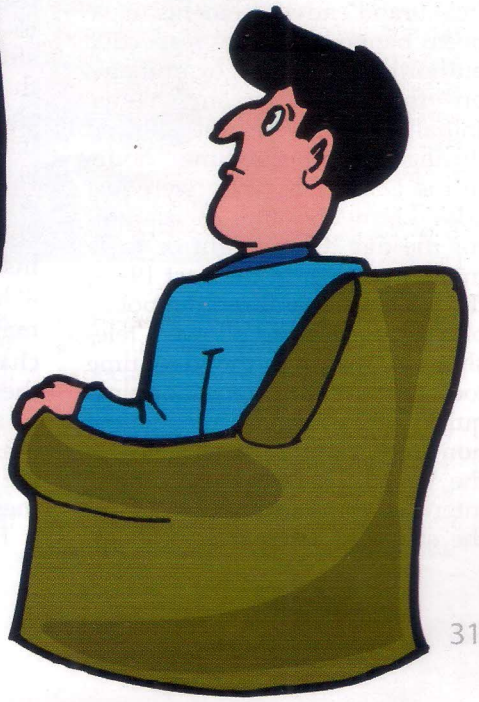
Secondly the order for the equipment is to be done using either credit cards or debit cards. The equipment as usual would be delivered via post parcel. No customer warranty or customer care is given. No profile of the company which makes the equipment will be given. There will be no mention of any repairs or spares required for this equipment if it demands while using. Exorbitant prices would run in thousands and it would also be shown that these prices were arrived at after slashing a lot of percent in the original cost as a promotional offer. They would offer even a CD pack along with the equipment as to how to use them.

Messages are power packed dialogues or narrations with exaggerations and hyperboles. No mention of possible side effects. Similarly there is no mention of usual taxes payable to government of India.

Comparison with the regular 'commercials' of the branded products

I have applied the same criteria to compare the content, structure, message and other factual information to the 'commercials' of branded products which we see in the regular television programmes on all days. Though these 'commercials' last for few seconds and do indulge in exaggerations of the product, the manufacturers, the details of the ingredients and customer care, etc are provided on the wrappers. Secondly they would not give telephone numbers for direct ordering. One can have a direct store experience across the sales counter. Further they are not as costly as the 'tele-shopping' products. However, the 'fairness' claims are routinely 'exaggerations' as doctors (skin specialists and beauticians) too say that the skin complexion change is not just as easy as the





application of 'fairness' creams. Even bloggers noted these findings in their blogs and some blogs even repeated doctors' views on the change of skin complexion. At the same time, advertisements like 'Stay Free', or 'Care Free', 'Mr.Muscle', 'Ease with Bang', 'Lysol', 'Hit' or 'All Out' are not exaggerations. Most of the bloggers using these products found that they do really work and show the results as demonstrated in the advertisements. At the same time, the tall claims of cosmetic soaps, detergent soaps and powders, etc may be still exaggerations. In all these cases, however, without exception the criteria applied for 'tele-shopping' products has yielded better answers.

The dubious role of Indian TV channels

Given the above analysis of the advertisements of 'tele-shopping' or 'tele-brands', the questions arise as to the role of TV channels in allowing such 'irresponsible' and 'unaccountable' advertising of products to go on their media in the present day of standardized methods of marketing and selling globally. Obviously, the Indian consumers have not grown to the status of their European or Western counterparts for an on-line and non-store experience of shopping.

In the US and in Europe, many of these 'tele-shopping' or 'tele-brand' advertisements have been banned by the respective authorities and the governments on the main stream media. Initially they were not allowed during the prime-time hours in the US or UK. They were just advertisements after a sign-off for the day at midnight or early in the morning. In the post 1990s, the US laws liberalized the policy of commercials and allowed 'tele-shopping' during the day time too. Further, the 'tele-shopping' quickly transformed into 'online non-store shopping experience' in the West. There the consumers' interests were taken care of by the stringent laws and the 'tele-shopping' industry has been fully governed by the laws of the State.

The television channels spend a lot of time for 'political analysis' but hardly find it relevant to go into the credibility of these products and expose the frauds in them.

In India, unfortunately till date no one seemed to have taken cognizance of these. There may be many people believing the reputation of the channel as 'synonymous' to the product of 'tele-shopping' or tele-brands' being advertised. Secondly, there is no complete awareness of the 'consumer' rights in this country. The television channels spend a lot of time for 'political analysis' but hardly find it relevant to go into the credibility of these products and expose the frauds in them. Such an investigative journalism would have indeed helped the consumers who are also their audience.

The present trend of TV channels is that if any one raises a hue and cry of a fraud by a bank/financier or a 'tele-brand' agency, then they would go on reporting it days together or hours together. But, by itself, a TV channel is not willing to undertake any investigative story as to the credibility of this high profile selling-'tele-shopping' or 'tele-brands' through its own media. The reason is obvious. These fraudulent advertisements lasting for 10 to 20 minutes with sometimes repeat insertions (flighting) would give a lot of advertising revenues, a major source of income. If the TV channels explore and investigate these products and publish stories of their fraud, their income may cease. Therefore, these TV channels are turning a nelson's eye towards these bogus advertisements.

Further these TV channels are lending their media to transmit unscientific messages, exaggerations and myths to be marketed. India is a country already beleaguered by a number of fake saadhus and sanyaasis. As such Indians could be easily duped or cheated by simple messages of faiths. If 'tele-shopping' advertisements coupled with spiritual messages and case studies of success stories reel out in succession on TV screen, one can guess enormous amount of 'unscientific' and 'irrational' thinking these advertisements are injecting into the youth and the adults affected by some personal problems.

How does it account for the social responsibility of the TV channels, which otherwise is construed as fourth estate with responsibility to watchdog both the government and unscrupulous sections of the society? These channels not only have to act as 'watch dogs' but also have a role to educate the people and inform the government how these 'advertisers' are cheating both the public and the government at a time both by the evasion of taxes and by lack of accountability to the customers. ■

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